

# Preface

This book has been a labour of love: love for a historical period, for an idea but, above all, for the commitment of idealists, both of level-headed and high-spirited character, who, a full century ago, in a world gone astray, were driven by the urge to leave this world to their children a decidedly better place than they had found it. It is foremost a tribute to the men and women who, on the shoulders of so many thinkers of all ages, hoped that there might just be an alternative approach to society, other than the aggressive nationalism they witnessed all around them. If this book is mine, the honour is theirs alone.

Prominent among them is that first generation of modern internationalists, scholars who, if not forgotten, often strike us more as visionaries than able craftsmen. They represented the generation which, for the greater part, at the end of their days of toiling, went through that intensely painful disillusion of the First World War. Today, at times it might appear as if they lived on the other side of the watershed, that is, before the days when the international order, however fragile and tender, became at least palpable, embedded in a true world organization with central headquarters to show for it. This book intends, at least partly, to unravel that myth and reveal that 'other side'. If, admittedly, as with all things human, man, in order to really believe, and in spite of ample and timely warning, needed one more proof of his self-destructive power, 'one more war to finish all wars', before mustering the will power to embrace the unknown, it was unquestionably the previous generation of moral philosophers, lawyers, and politicians as much as the peace apostles who, in their prolonged clashes and exchange of views paved the way for this League of Nations. They were the ones to outline its province and priorities, to mark its bonds and boundaries, in short to lay down its intellectual stratum.

Somehow the outcome of war often seems so much more tangible than that of debate. Yet, slightly too many have been the battles that were heralded as final and all-decisive. History has shown, and the history of Europe in particular, that military means alone have rarely exerted lasting influence or afforded durable solutions. Prolonged and recurrent debate, on the contrary, while often enough deprecated as non-conclusive in the short run, many a time has proven pivotal in germinating the seeds for durable mental change and innovative social reforms.

The Hague Peace Conference is very much a case in point. It is not so much its immediate results which were epoch-making. Actually, in the eyes of most contemporary observers, its failures were much more striking than its successes. The disarmament deception by far outweighed the arbitration euphoria, the ideal momentarily lost so seemingly much more precious than the one come true by surprise. But then, as veteran diplomat and President of the Conference, Baron de Staal, acknowledged: 'Today we are too near to the cradle to see clearly.' Or, as the great Léon Bourgeois observed: 'Let us wait and see, and judge a century from now.'

Truly, the merits of the First Hague Peace Conference were the initiative and gathering in the first place, the debate on principle in itself, the belated, but timely dawning to all involved of the immense complexity of the issues engaged and, as a corollary, the disenchanting discovery of the inevitable failure of any attempts prompted by mere idealism. To build their temple of peace, it was well understood that they first had to lay the proper foundations, learn a craft and raise a scaffold.

The sheer size of this work may easily mislead the reader in taking this publication for an all-comprehensive study. In many ways it is not. This is an analysis of the Conference in the perspective of a full hundred years, not the discussion of a full hundred years. Cross-references to the contemporary 'state-of-the-art' are mostly implicit. Not that the other approach would not be alluring. Indeed, commemorations derive their sole legitimacy from the topical relevance of their substance matter. However, with the First Hague Peace Conference, the problem is precisely the unfamiliarity of modern man with its substance matter. The Conference is generally dismissed on account of its results, which were by all standards not too impressive. Often enough, during this first ever debate on so many vexed issues, unanimity proved well beyond the grasp of delegates, eluding the formal conclusion of debate by way of a convention. Meanwhile, in a sense much more intriguing than the handful of resolutions and declarations eventually agreed upon, was the debate itself. Here, the clash of the old and new world is revealed; here, the first confrontation ever,

on any appreciable level, of strict nationalism and global thinking becomes manifest. It is the *procès-verbaux*, much more than the conventions, which left room for hope.

In concentrating on the formal results only, modern research has often ignored the intensity of the debate and, consequently, done injustice to the most enlightened among the delegates. By retracing the substance of the meetings, this book attempts to recall this debate. It is trusted that, to many present-day observers, both the issues tackled and the opinions expressed at The Hague a full hundred years ago, will sound eerily familiar – and perhaps not altogether irrelevant.

And then of course, to this gathering of a world still so small by comparison, to that so naively self-proclaimed Parliament of Man, clings the irresistible charm of all first-ers, the myth of an endearing summer lodge of queens, the scenery of debate set against the imposing lustre of a Golden Age canvases, the gathering of commissions watched over by the Triumph of the Prince of Peace. The 1899 Hague Peace Conference comes well within the *fin de siècle* atmosphere of the *belle époque*. It evokes the ceremonial splendour of the period, highlights the culture of public addresses, and recalls the heyday of the exclusive seaside resort. In short, apart from reviewing the proceedings of the Conference, this publication also aspires to echoing a world long gone by.

It is a truism that this book has profited from the generous support of many, friends and colleagues, in various capacities. First and foremost, I am indebted to Judge Pieter H. Kooijmans for his willingness to contribute a Foreword to this book, and an inspired and all too generous one at that. I sincerely hope that this effort of mine to revive the early days of the Work of the Hague may please the eminent standard-bearer of Dutch internationalism at the Peace Palace.

Once more, I owe deep gratitude to Kluwer Law International, and more in particular to its director, Alan Stephens, for his unwavering faith from first to last. But likewise I owe Annebeth Rosenboom, whose mere smile can work wonders in moments of doubt.

As stated above, this work is a labour of love. With passion ruling, the author's demands must at times have been less than reasonable. If this publication materialized within the narrow time limits set, and in the present form, it is for the single reason that all closely involved performed well beyond the call of duty.

Thus, measured by the mass of work produced, it would seem ages ago, but in fact publication of this book occurs less than six months from the day Bert and Lilian Mellink were first confronted with the innovative technology by which this book was to be produced. They literally performed miracles, and perhaps the greatest miracle of all was their imperturbable cheerfulness. But in this they never fooled me: I never failed to appreciate the great privilege they insisted I could take for granted.

At Dordrecht, the expert staff of Kluwer Academic Publishers mustered all their energy, expertise and creative thinking to comply with the author's every wish, up to the last, hectic days of frenzied labour. Under no circumstances, Robert Donkersteeg, for one, ever lost control. Over the years, Antoon J. van Vliet, has become very dear to me. As many readers will have guessed, his expert eye once more supervised the layout of this work. Once again, his craftsmanship and resilience proved storm-proof on all occasions. I can only hope that our friendship, too, has stood the trial of the Herculean Labour he was faced with this time: *forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit...* In a similar vein, I can only guess what the past few months have meant for (and must have done to) the innate perfectionism of Ellen Girmscheid, who meticulously proofread the manuscript.

New to me, but veterans in the trade, are Rob Lisman and his team at PrePress. It is always gratifying to be faced with competence and courteousness. To find these qualities combined with speed has been a rare comfort.

Whatever one can muster with time, patience and practice, one can never aspire to equalling the true-born native speaker. Not, that is, at the level of Maureen Sullivan. I may pose as the acrobat, and she is the first to gratify me, but she is the safety net – and I would never even think of climbing the rope ladder without her.

This holds for the English language. Still, if words came to me at all – and they never flowed so easily – 'at the end of the day', as she herself would put it, there is only one person to thank for them, my dearest Louise. To paraphrase a French chansonnier: 'tout ce que j'ai pu écrire, je l'ai puisé à l'encre de tes yeux'.

A.E.